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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is the exploration of various issues surrounding the ongoing development of the drama/performing arts program at Harris County High School in Hamilton, Georgia. Eventually, the information collected will be assimilated into a dissertation at Auburn University. For this segment of the study, a literature review was conducted and one of the three assistant principals of Harris County High School was conducted and one of the three assistant principals of Harris County High School was interviewed. There is a contemporary call for drama research worldwide because a great void exists in this area of study, especially in the United States. Additionally, the drama program at Harris County High School before 1998 was developed primarily as an extension to the regular English classes. The author is the first drama coach to seriously pursue the creation/implementation of a performance drama curriculum at that particular site. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/RS)

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Running Head: ISSUES OF DRAMA PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

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V. Jackson

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To Be or Not to Be? : An Exploration of Issues Involved in Drama Program Development at Harris County High School

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is the exploration of various issues surrounding the ongoing development of the drama/performing arts program at Harris County High School in Hamilton, Georgia. Eventually, the information collected will be assimilated into a dissertation, an element of my doctoral program at Auburn University. For this segment of my study, I conducted a literature review and interviewed one of the three assistant principals of Harris County High School.

I found that there is a contemporary call for drama research worldwide because a great void exists in this area of study, especially in the United States. Additionally, I discovered that the drama program at Harris County High School before my arrival in 1998 was developed primarily as an extension to the regular English classes. I am the first drama coach to seriously pursue the creation/implementation of a performance drama curriculum at that particular site.

To Be or Not to Be? : An Exploration of Issues Involved in Drama Program Development at Harris County High School

This particular study examines the critical issues and dynamics involved in the ongoing development of an actual Drama program at Harris County High School (HCHS) in Hamilton, Georgia. Such an educational program might be titled a performing arts program, a theater/theatre program, or a drama program. By any of these names, the program would be the same. Specifically, I currently serve as the Drama teacher at HCHS. I have a vested interest in collecting multiple perspectives and diverse information about the best choices involved in the implementation of drama programs in American public schools and, additionally, the acquisition of knowledge concerning the nuances involved in drama program development at my specific site. I believe that these findings may enable me to make and/or suggest best choices for drama program development and make a significant contribution to current educational research on drama in American public schools. I feel that the ability to make best choices in drama program development area may improve my current job performance and result in the subsequent development of a positive public image for that drama program. Additionally, the students may benefit from the establishment of a strong, healthy drama program.

As a veteran educator, I am very aware that the American public, in general, often views fine arts classes of all types as non-essential elements of the curriculum. This particular perception is especially made manifest if financial hardship overtakes a school system and cutbacks become necessary. During those particular points in time, many fine arts instructors face the rather substantial risk of program annihilation by the very school systems that encouraged the very creation of the program. This perception is substantiated in the literature (O'Hara, 1996). This harsh reality is a strong driver in

the psyche of some experienced drama teachers. For example, I choose to teach at least one class of English each year and resist becoming a full-time drama teacher for this very reason. Needless to say, I have an interest in appropriate program development that takes into consideration the needs and perceptions of all stakeholders, not excluding my own. Admittedly, there are variables over which one has no control. For the purposes of this paper, however, I explore areas that can be realistically addressed by the drama instructor and that might result in positive program development for students, teachers, and schools.

I strongly believe that fine arts programs like drama make significant contributions to the best aspects of a society/civilization and offer a wonderful venue for artistic expression by human beings. Significantly, the performing arts enable the integration of a complex, created group goal/reality into the typical school curriculum and the participants encounter real world circumstances/problems during the evolutionary processes involved in the development of a production/play. Significantly, plays require human beings to work collaboratively in group settings. This promotes the acceptance of personal responsibility and a mutual goal(s). For these and other reasons, I am prepared to take the risk managing a performing arts program in an American public school setting.

When I made my decision to focus on the development of the drama program at HCHS for this case study, the first research question arose. What resources are available that may contribute to best choice selection(s) while developing a performing arts program at Harris County High School? Obviously, this question is rather broad and data collections must be directed. After careful consideration, I have decided to limit my initial probe into this study to a literature review and an interview with an assistant principal at Harris County High School. I selected this person carefully. She

is a native of Harris County and has a direct influence on the scheduling of drama classes at the high school.

In subsequent efforts with this dissertation, I plan to review/revisit my personal reflective journal entries since 1998, to interview two members of the HCHS administrative team, and administer a survey to the HCHS drama students and parents. I plan to be flexible with these decisions and add other data sources as able. With these data collection decisions made, I am ready to look at the overall history of drama programs in American public schools.

To Begin at the Beginning: Drama Programs in American Public Schools and Around the Globe

When I first considered the topic of theater/drama program development, I assumed that a substantial amount of scholarly writing existed on the topic. I was wrong. Very little data has been collected about educational theater in the United States. However, large quantities of information exist about professional and community theater in the form of popular magazines, not educational journals. This might be credited to the tendency of American society to produce actors for the professional stage and movie screens. Few professional actors in American society devote their time to either participating in or documenting the particular challenges involved with providing educational drama experiences within the public school setting. Other explanations may be more colorful.

From my own personal experiences, I must admit that I have gotten every job I have ever worked as a public school teacher because the principal realized that I could and would teach drama. I, then, realized that I must build the information about educational drama history from fragments of information from other areas of study and the scarce, limited drama research from around the world. Interestingly, it was at that

particular moment that I realized that I had stumbled into an educational research void and, inadvertently, I had found my personal dissertation topic.

A fair amount has been written about educational theater programs in other countries like England. The British publishing company Carfax produces a journal titled Drama Education that has accumulated many articles about Drama research in United Kingdom (UK). Significantly, the British have contributed to the overall development of the American culture and mindset. The culture is older and more established than its American counterpart. As a result of this realization, I began to collect research information about the British educational theater with the hope that I might gain some valuable insight(s) about educational drama at large. What I discovered was quite intriguing.

Researchers and educators from around the world gathered at the University of Exeter, UK, in April 1995, for the first Drama and Theater in Education Research Conference. During this meeting, research projects were presented that ranged from an examination of working class theater called Victims Theatre used in India as an alternative education for illiterates, to the exploration of the use of drama for AIDS and lifestyle education in KwaSulu, Natal. Detailed consideration of eclectic research methodologies examining a wide variety of theater in education practices across the globe were presented from primary, secondary, and third levels of education (O'Hara, 1996).

The Drama and Theater in Education Conference participants generally acknowledged that it is only through observable good practice in the schools and training institutions will drama develop its curriculum niche. Currently, there is a lack of contemporary research informing teacher training in drama at the end of the twentieth century. Presently, many teachers feel insecure and unprepared to handle

drama in the classroom. The place of drama in schools today is a testimony to years of complacency, disparate practices, and research inactivity (O'Hara, 1996; National Education Goals, 1998; Erickson, 1995; Griffiths, 1997).

Drama has been associated with gains in language acquisition, cooperative learning, empathy, creativity, and values clarification (Joyce & Weil, 1996; Mullen, 1999). A few drama educators have started producing articles on drama in-services designed to assist teachers with overcoming their insecurities about teaching drama. These in-services attempt to increase teacher capacity to enrich learning across developmental domains (Hundert, 1996). Despite its multitude of benefits, drama is not a regular component in the curriculum of many schools (Hundert, 1996).

There is a general disagreement about the research approach(es) that should be taken in drama research. Some advocate qualitative processes. A few advocate quantitative approaches. Many believe that these two research views should be used in combination. Still others advocate the creation of a new research style designed for the field (Somers, 1996; Crowl, 1996; Cooper, 1996; Dembo, 1994; Yassa, 1999). A few writers warily caution drama researchers about the ethical and moral issues associated with certain types of theater like ethnotheatre (Nicholson, 1999).

John Somers (1996) suggests that drama be explored through experience, reasoning, and by means of research. He says that in life these three processes are inseparable and all human beings engage in them to some degree. With ready access to eclectic research approaches and an egalitarian attitude to who may conduct inquiry, one might observe a commitment to research in every context in which drama happens. He feels that the aim of the research should be to illuminate practice. This attitude might work in drama research because reflection and evaluation processes are firmly embedded in the practice(s) of drama people. Drama practitioners constantly monitor and reassess their progress toward the set goal of a production.

Once I started exploring the existing research, I discovered that a great deal of information has been produced/written about coaching students in athletic competition. Interestingly, I have found the activities of contest drama to have striking similarity to the experiences involved in coaching football. I, therefore, have made the decision to pursue a study of the existing literature about developing coaching programs at a later date.

Forbidden Love: A Brief History of Drama Programs at HCHS

To obtain the information for this section, I interviewed one of the three assistant principals at HCHS who had attended the Harris County School System as a child. She has worked for that system for her entire career. For the last ten years, she has worked as an assistant principal for the high school. Additionally, she is a couple years away from retirement and has lived in Harris County, Georgia, all of her life.

The interview consisted of a few questions about the history of Drama at HCHS. (See Table 1) I gave her the interview questions three days in advance of the actual interview. She was prepared. In the first question, I asked what she knows/remembers about the history of the Drama Program at HCHS.

> Well, I had to think about this one for a while. It has been a long time since I thought about the plays we did in high school. Let me see. O.K. (pause) Uh, we did some plays in elementary school. I even had the chance to perform with Chet Adkins (a country music singer). I went to school with him and we performed on the same stage. That is one of my claims to fame. The stage was not at school, however. Since I have been working at the high school as an administrator, we have not had senior productions. Now, you are doing some plays for competition. We haven't had that to offer to our students in the past. Those plays you are doing are open to students 9th through 12th grade who take

your Drama class. The kids are performing on a stage in front of large audiences. Before you started working here last year the plays for the high school were done as classroom presentations for the English Department. We did not attempt to produce plays for the stage. We have that new auditorium, now. Isn't it beautiful? I'm glad we are putting it to good use (Jackson, 2000).

In the next question, I asked what expectations do you have for the HCHS Drama Program in the future. She was optimistic and said the following:

I am very excited about the Drama Program here at our high school. The new auditorium is a wonderful facility for our students. I am very pleased that we participated in the Georgia One Act Play Contest this year and I enjoyed our recent production of Romeo and Juliet. I am looking forward to many more productions at our school. I have a lot of students who have signed up for Drama. Enrollment has quadrupled since last year. I had some students in my office today asking to be enrolled in the spring classes. We have not been able to offer performing drama, only classroom presentations and book study on drama. Now, the kids are getting costumes from New York and everything. I loved the period costumes in that last show. I am pleased with the program's progress so far (Jackson, 2000).

In the last question, I asked her if she had any other information/ideas about the HCHS Drama Program that might be helpful. She responded with the following:

I would like to see us continue offering plays for our students. The Board of Education and the Superintendent are behind this program. They want to see our kids succeed. The kids are really excited about the Drama Program. I hope you decide to keep teaching Drama. A lot of our other teachers just taught it until they could get out of it. I guess they were just marking time until the next English teaching job materialized. Now, I think that we are going to have to

adjust our courses for next year to allow for the number of students who wish to take your class. In fact, I will be contacting you in a few months to discuss how this will impact your class schedule for next year. Keep up the good work. I am here if you need assistance. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you need my help (Jackson, 2000).

From this interview, one can readily ascertain that HCHS students have not had access to a strong performing arts/drama department in the recent past. In fact, participating in the performing arts for HCHS students has been limited, if not forbidden, because of the lack of an established drama program and no quality facilities. Students with a natural talent in this area were denied this avenue of artistic expression. Basically, Drama at Harris County High School, when it was taught, was offered through the regular English classes. Most of the English/Drama instructors from the past were not interested in drama program development. Generally, they were marking time until their seniority allowed them to pass the drama class to the incoming, newly hired English teacher. Often, students who had no other interest were placed into the room to fulfill a class requirement. Participation in Georgia One Act Play contest has been limited and, in many years, non-existent. Although the school did have occasional school plays, these productions were not performed to serious competition standards and were, generally, in the form of senior plays that were performed once a year. In the years prior to 1998, drama performances were severely limited to classroom performances for groups of English students without adequate facilities and costumes.

Where Do We Go From Here? : Suggestions from the Research

Educational researchers worldwide have neglected research projects in contemporary drama education and it appears that this research field is literally wide open in the United States. Contemporary articles on drama education from the UK call for the development of a "sanely conceived" curriculum that has been substantiated by research (O'Hara, 1996). Still other articles

and books call for the establishment of acceptable research practices for the field (Garth, Isobel, & Lynn, 1999; Cooper, 1996; Erickson, 1995; Howe & Dougherty, 1993; Joyce & Weil, 1996).

In future explorations on this topic I might contact the parents/community for their opinions about drama program development at HCHS. I plan to implement research surveys and practice newly discovered program development procedures to increase parental involvement and support for the drama program. Parents are stakeholders, too. Furthermore, I will continue to expand the literature review. Also I will include research elements about coaching.

The completion of this particular paper represents a personal victory for me because I have found a suitable dissertation topic at a relatively early point in my doctoral program. I plan to conduct a case study of the HCHS Drama Program development from 1998 to the year I finish writing my dissertation, probably 2002. Furthermore, I have decided that the title of my first drama book will be So, You Want to Build a Drama Program at Your School.

Table Caption

Table 1. Interview questions for HCHS administrator

Interview questions for HCHS administrator about the Drama Program

1. What do you know/remember about the history the Drama Program at HCHS?
2. What expectations do you have for the HCHS Drama Program in the future?
3. Do you have any other information/ideas about the HCHS Drama Program that might be helpful?

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